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Northern Ireland: hardening borders and hardening attitudes

John Barry

In this year's general election it was perhaps Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party that had the best result of all. The DUP took ten of the eighteen seats in Northern Ireland (up from eight in 2015), and roundly defeated their main unionist rivals to consolidate their position both as the largest party in Northern Ireland and as the largest unionist party. Now that Theresa May has been forced to agree a supply and confidence deal with them, many people are scrambling to figure out who and what the DUP are - and are by turns expressing surprise, horror and incredulity at what they discover.

The DUP have so far been the main beneficiaries of the triumph of the extremes over the centre that has been a feature of Northern Ireland's consociational model of governance.¹ And it is the combination of this trend and Westminster's first-past-the-post system that has now given the DUP its current pivotal role in the UK as a whole.

Sinn Féin, the DUP's erstwhile 'enemy' and now partner in the Northern Ireland Assembly, also increased their tally of MPs at the general election (from four to seven), and also thereby defeated their nationalist rivals, the Social Democratic and Labour Party.² In this, the two ethnic champion parties of Ulster were continuing a dynamic that had begun in the spring 2017 Assembly elections, when each increased their number of MLAs at the expense of their intra-community rivals.

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Ever since the much lauded sectarian power-sharing Executive of 2007, power in the Assembly has been effectively 'shared out' between SF and the DUP. Indeed Northern Ireland appears to be heading towards a Janus-faced system in which each of the dominant parties publicly appeals to their sectarian base for electoral power by blaming the 'other' for all the Assembly's faults, while privately collaborating with the very same 'other' to ensure they remain the dominant powers in the political process. This model has been further complicated, though by no means disturbed, by the fall-out from Brexit. Thus SF, who habitually opposed the European Union and did not campaign in the referendum, now claim to be the leaders of the anti-Brexit movement, while the DUP, who campaigned for a hard Brexit, now quietly counsel the Conservative Party for a soft Brexit.

This trend towards sectarian polarisation has resulted in a geographically based division of Westminster seats: the DUP now represents the eastern part of Northern Ireland, from East Londonderry to Strangford, while SF represents the border counties and the nationalist redoubt of West Belfast. Indeed, the (relative) pluralism of the Assembly - reflects the complex and rich diversity of the Northern Ireland population more accurately than its representatives at Westminster: the DUP and SF between them hold 55 seats out of 90, but there also MLAs from the UUP, SDLP, Alliance, Greens and People before Profit. The polarising effects of the FPTP system can be seen most vividly in the South Belfast constituency, which in March 2017 elected five MLAs from five different parties, but in June returned only one elected representative - from the DUP.

The Assembly election in spring 2017 (called to solve the deadlock after the resignation of Martin McGuinness following the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal) was notable in that Sinn Féin won only one seat less than the DUP (27 to 28). Perhaps even more significantly, the combined Unionist parties (DUP, UUP, TUV), for the first time were no longer a majority in the Northern Ireland Assembly (and the DUP's loss of MLAs meant they no longer had the power to issue a petition of concern, used to stop reform of social policy, such as same-sex marriage or abortion). This was interpreted as a 'warning' to unionists that they needed to mobilise and get the vote out. This was a consistent theme of the Westminster election campaign, and it contributed to the greater sectarian atmosphere: the DUP convinced unionist voters to back them as the strongest unionist party to 'take on' Sinn Féin.

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Here one must understand the two most important features of post-Agreement Northern Irish politics. The first is the longstanding position that here we vote to keep someone out rather than to vote someone in (such tactical voting was of course also in evidence in other parts of the UK, but it's long been part of the political DNA here). The second - and this is perhaps unique to Northern Ireland - is that we tend to elect 'negotiators' not 'legislators': the dominant parties portray themselves as locked into a permanent opposition with 'the other', and each argues that they will be the strongest tribunes in the head-to-head battles with the tribunes from the other side. In this sense SF and the DUP need each other (and not just because of the mandatory power-sharing arrangements of the 1998 Agreement and the operation of the NI Executive): they need their counterpart in order to scare their own voters into turning out for them.

The results of the Westminster election have now strengthened calls within unionism for 'one unionist party' - viz, the DUP. For its part, Sinn Féin, in wiping out the SDLP at Westminster, has helped create a situation in which, for the first time since 1966, Irish nationalists will have no representation in the House of Commons, given the SF policy of abstentionism. The only Northern Irish voices heard during this Parliament will be unionist ones.

DUP-UDA links

One major focus of concern over the DUP's new position at Westminster is their links to loyalist paramilitary groups. These can be traced back to the early 1970s, when Ian Paisley, the party's founder, marched at the head of masked and armed loyalist paramilitary units during the 1974 Ulster Workers Council strike, which brought down the first power-sharing government in Northern Ireland. Over the years many loyalists claiming allegiance to Paisley and his views were jailed for bombings, though Paisley himself denied inciting them. He repeatedly denied that his sectarian rhetoric - warnings that Catholics would 'breed like rabbits and multiply like vermin' and that 'loyal Ulster' would be sold down the river if it did not fight for its very existence - could ever be taken to imply support for physical violence.

The DUP was also linked to Ulster Resistance, a quasi-paramilitary and political organisation that was set up to oppose the 1985 Anglo-Irish agreement. The mass meeting to launch Ulster Resistance, held at Belfast's Ulster Hall, was addressed not

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only by Paisley but also by his successor as DUP leader Peter Robinson; and both Paisley and Robinson appeared at Ulster Resistance rallies wearing red, paramilitary-style berets.

More recently the DUP has also been accused of receiving support from and in turn supporting community organisations linked to the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a loyalist paramilitary group that was responsible for hundreds of deaths in the troubles and is widely viewed as being involved in criminality, drug dealing, money laundering and extortion.

The DUP is not the 'political wing' of the UDA ... but the UDA certainly publicly supports the DUP as its preferred political party. Any endorsement from loyalist paramilitaries was publicly rebuffed by senior DUP figures during the election campaign, but the proverbial 'dogs on the street' know that there is an unhealthy positive relationship between the two organisations. Thus, for example, between 2014 and 2016 UDA-affiliated organisations successfully applied for and were granted £5 million of public money from the Social Investment Fund (SIF), for projects in Belfast, Lisburn and Bangor. Last year, Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP, in comments comparing the relationships of the DUP with the two main loyalist paramilitary groups, stated: 'In truth, with the UDA we get a lot more cooperation at local level, in dealing with the transition, in the transformation in those loyalist communities, because the UDA doesn't have political ambitions. So they're prepared to work with the mainstream unionist parties'.³

In the 2014 local elections former UDA prisoner Sam 'Chalky' White was an (unsuccessful) DUP candidate in East Belfast. White was also a full-time employee of a publicly funded initiative, Resolve, an organisation strongly linked to the UDA which addresses issues of restorative justice. A NI Criminal Justice Inspectorate report into Resolve named a local DUP MLA, Robin Newton (a former speaker of the NI Assembly) as being 'very supportive of Resolve and keen to see it flourish in the interests of community cohesion'. Newton's old office is now occupied by the Resolve group, and he was also a member of the Social Investment Fund steering panel that recommended that the UDA-linked Charter for Northern Ireland be awarded £1.7 million from SIF funds. Dee Stitt, the CEO of Charter NI, is a former UDA boss. In 2012 DUP Assembly Member Alex Easton wrote a glowing reference in support of Stitt's application to join SIF's South Eastern Steering Group: he later claimed to be unaware that Stitt had been a paramilitary gangster.

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Supply and confidence ... with a Northern Irish twist.

All these funding decisions are above board, in plain sight, and no brown envelopes are exchanged in the dead of night. And a generous interpretation would be that the DUP is simply lacking in political judgement in the support it gives people and groups who it sees as being on a journey from terrorism to peace, which inevitably means it is sometimes faced with the issue of what to do about people who are 'community workers' and officers in charitable and voluntary organisations by day, and drug-dealers and thugs by night.

On the other hand, imagining the English Defence League or some other violent right-wing xenophobic group publicly endorsing and calling on people to vote for the Conservatives may assist an understanding of how strange (to say the least) we are in Northern Ireland, where 'paramilitary peacekeeping' has become the norm - and how strange it is for the Conservatives to be seeking a confidence and supply arrangement with a party that has their own established, if contested and publicly denied, confidence and supply arrangement in place with loyalist paramilitaries.

Brexit and the border

In the June 2016 European referendum, when NI voted to remain (54-46 per cent), the DUP were the main party that supported Brexit. They were thus part of the wider Brexit victory, although in the minority on the issue in Ulster.⁴ The prospect of a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and of the UK leaving the single market and customs union, has made its own contribution to a hardening of attitudes. SF and others (including the SDLP and some Irish political parties) have argued that the only way to resist the threat of a hard border is through holding a border poll and the reunification of Ireland; or, short of that (and as a stepping stone to it in SF thinking), they have called for a 'special status' for NI so that it can remain (to some degree) a member of the EU (perhaps as part of the customs union) while remaining part of a post-Brexit UK. ('The reverse Greenland' option is one of a number of creative constitutional-legal models being discussed in NI in the wake of Brexit.) This is something that is resisted by the DUP and other unionist parties since it may mean the border shifting from where it is now - between NI and the Republic - to a divide marked by the Irish Sea i.e. between the island of Ireland and Great Britain. Such a new (administrative)

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border would be regarded by unionists as weakening the link between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and thus undermining Northern Ireland's Britishness.

A soft border, on the other hand, might lessen support for a border poll. So the DUP may press the UK government for more progress on a soft border, some kind of bespoke arrangements for NI (but without calling it 'special designated status'), and, above all, a NI seat or strong voice at the Brexit negotiating table.

SF's political calculation after the Westminster election, and in the negotiations to re-establish the NI power-sharing executive, may well be focused on what will best position them as leading a renewed reunification campaign. So, while the DUP are keen that Brexit does not undermine NI's position as an integral and equal part of the UK, SF are moving in the diametrically opposite direction, seeing Brexit as an opportunity to pursue the reunification of Ireland.

Conclusion

As Giovanni Sartori wrote: 'If you reward divisions and divisiveness ... you increase and eventually heighten divisions and divisiveness.'

Do the elections of 2017 mark staging posts along the way from a multi-party to a two-party system, and an 'end game' in which a face-off between the 'two communities' is staged in democratic elections instead of through force? The direction of travel certainly displays for all to see the outworkings of our peace process (increasingly a 'frozen' or 'negative peace') and its associated institutional arrangements. Meanwhile loyalist paramilitaries kill people in open daylight in shopping centres and continue to prey on working-class communities, fuel poverty is the highest in the UK, the problems in our health system mean that people suffer and die needlessly, and the epidemic of young male suicide continues.

Do the two elections, coupled with the current instability and uncertainty generated both by Brexit and the non-functioning of the power-sharing Executive, mean that the peace process is threatened, or that NI is on the path back to war? No. Do the results of these elections increase the hold this 'frozen peace' has in Northern Ireland? Maybe - though the answer is definitely yes if NI is in for a period of prolonged direct rule.

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Long after the English media has tired of lampooning the DUP and their views (who knew the UKIP-shaped hole in British politics could be filled so quickly?), the best hope for Northern Ireland will continue to be the ‘slow boring of hard boards’, as the great German sociologist Max Weber described liberal democratic politics. And we might one day turn away from a politics that orientates itself around Brexit, border polls and maintaining Northern Ireland’s Britishness, rather than local ‘bread and butter issues’. Regrettable as the current situation may be, jaw jaw is better than war, war, as Churchill so wisely noted.

Even so, this frozen peace, presided over, created and reflected by these two parties, means that, almost two decades after the Good Friday Agreement, there is still no agreement about NI’s present (and certainly no agreement over its troubled past), and no shared vision about its future (as opposed to the ‘shared out’ version jointly promoted by SF and the DUP). Jaw jaw is better than war, but ‘where there is no vision, there the people perish’. So, to a frozen peace we can add a visionless peace.

With a side order of ‘confidence and supply’, DUP-style.

Notes

1. Consociational models seek to promote democracy in segmented societies by power-sharing through a grand coalition of all political parties.
2. The other seat was held by Independent unionist Sylvia Herman, who originally held the seat as a member of the UUP.
3. www.newsletter.co.uk/news/uda-work-with-us-but-uvf-aren-t-in-a-good-place-says-dup-mp-1-7500689.
4. A further insight into NI-style confidence and supply arrangements could be seen in the DUP’s decision to spend the bulk of a £435,000 donation from the Constitutional Research Council (a secretive group of pro-union business people led by a Conservative Party member) on purchasing newspaper advertising space for the Leave campaign - in England. Under NI electoral rules political parties are not required to publicise donor names, and the DUP only revealed this information after considerable media pressure.

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THE CORBYN EFFECT



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